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## CHAUCER'S TESTIMONY AS TO HIS AGE

Some years ago, when first seeing in the volumes of the *Scrope and Grosvenor Controversy* the suggestion of Sir Harris Nicolas that discredit or inconclusiveness belongs to Chaucer's testimony regarding his age in 1386, it occurred to me that the reasoning had little to commend it. Now that the suggestion of Sir Harris has been urged with apparently greater force by Mr. Samuel Moore in *Anglia*, XXV, 1-8, it seems worth examining more carefully. The reasoning of Sir Harris Nicolas may be baldly stated in syllogistic form. Some men who testified in the Scrope and Grosvenor heraldic trial were, let us not say members of an early Ananias club, but at least too careless of exactness. Chaucer was a man who testified in the aforesaid trial. Therefore Chaucer's testimony cannot be trusted.

Placed in this form the fallacy of the reasoning appears at once. Nor is the argument essentially better in the form now stated by Mr. Moore. Twenty-three of those who testified in the Scrope and Grosvenor trial varied from their true ages, as ascertained from other documents, by from three to seventeen years. Fourteen others varied from their true ages, as otherwise ascertained, either one or two years. Chaucer testified in the trial aforesaid, though we have no independent testimony as to his inaccuracy. Still we may not trust Chaucer's testimony, because some of his fellow-witnesses were inaccurate, and he may have been so.<sup>1</sup>

It is evident that this reasoning does not much assist us in the main point, the interpretation of Chaucer's testimony. It will be

<sup>1</sup> I have no desire to cavil at Mr. Moore's reasoning. Yet it may be pointed out that he assumes inaccuracy of four of the twenty-three witnesses on the Scrope side, by the statement of their ages when called in behalf of Grosvenor. This is scarcely independent evidence of a sufficient sort. If these four cannot be depended upon when called on the one side, their statements cannot be assumed to be correct when called on the other. These witnesses should rather be thrown out altogether, or at least wholly discredited. That would leave, of the twenty-three cited by Mr. Moore, nineteen who show considerable inaccuracy in the statement of their ages, besides fourteen who come within two years of their exact age. I refer to those mentioned by name in the above article. Moreover, so far as I can determine from Mr. Moore's statements, these four are the only ones who overstated their ages, a procedure quite at variance with the general practice in such cases as we shall see. There is thus another reason for distrusting their testimony in one place or the other.

clear to all, I think, that the faulty memories or deliberate deceptions of any number of Chaucer's fellow-witnesses do not really reflect upon his integrity. If it suggests a possibility of error, that error must be proved by independent evidence in Chaucer's individual case. It cannot be logically inferred from the testimony of others regarding themselves. Even if a conspiracy to conceal the truth could be proved against them, it would not involve Chaucer without independent evidence that he was a conspirator.

Nor does Mr. Moore's conjecture, that the age of the witness may have been the guess of some recording clerk, seem to be necessary, as I shall presently show. Before doing so, let me call attention to its improbability in Chaucer's case. If the age of Chaucer, as given in the Scrope and Grosvenor trial, were the guess of a clerk, we must assume the same explanation for the next statement attributed to the poet. When giving his age he also asserted that he had "borne arms twenty-seven years."<sup>1</sup> Now this twenty-seven years leads us back exactly to the year 1359, when we know that Chaucer was with the army of Edward III in France.

Besides, the words of Chaucer are even more exact than the round number twenty-seven implies. His testimony in the Scrope and Grosvenor trial was given on December 15, 1386. In 1359 the truce of Bordeaux had been extended to St. John's Day, June 24. The failure of the peace negotiations was proclaimed by the king on August 12, though Edward and his sons did not leave England until the last of October.<sup>2</sup> If, therefore, Chaucer's arming had been as early as August, 1359, it was, in December, 1386, at most twenty-seven years and four months that he had "borne arms." This significant part of Chaucer's testimony—for I shall assume it to be Chaucer's until further proof is forthcoming—is therefore accurate to a nicety.<sup>3</sup> May we not infer that the witness who was so exact in the one fact was not far wrong in the other statement, that he was

<sup>1</sup> "Armeez par xxvii ans," *Life Records of Chaucer*, p. 265.

<sup>2</sup> See my article on Chaucer's "First Military Service," *Romanic Review*, III, 325 f.

<sup>3</sup> In a brief sketch of the poet's life for a recent edition of *Poems of Chaucer*, I have based the most important inference as to the poet's age upon this part of the testimony. If, as Froissart says, "there was not knight, squire, or man of honor, from the age of twenty to sixty years, that did not go," the first age would just include a youth born in 1340, as the last-mentioned age just included Henry, duke of Lancaster, and under Edward the most important military leader.

"of the age of forty years and more."<sup>1</sup> What interpretation, then, may reasonably belong to the latter expression?

The phrase "of the age of forty years and more" does not, at first sight, lend itself to extreme exactness. Let us see, however. And first Mr. Moore also notes, in his careful examination of the testimony in the Scrope and Grosvenor trial, that a large number of the witnesses gave their ages as forty, fifty, or sixty years, with or without the "and more" (*et plus*). He comments: "It is certainly an extraordinary fact that, among about 140 persons between the ages of thirty-five and sixty-four years of age, there should be more than 75 persons who are said to be either forty, fifty, or sixty years of age." In a footnote he explains that he has disregarded the *et plus* in this computation. Yet before we assume intentional or other inaccuracy here, let us ask what these figures mean in the light of the best modern interpretation of statistics.

It is well known to statisticians of the census that returns of ages always contain a certain element of error. For example, on a-priori grounds it must be assumed that the number of persons of different ages living at one time should vary by a definite arithmetical progression. Thus, as the death-rate is a fairly constant factor, increasing from year to year, there will be fewer persons of the age of twenty-one than of twenty, of twenty-two than of twenty-one, and so on in a regular series. The actual census returns, however, do not show this regular decrease in the number reporting at different ages. In the first place, as a statistical authority states, "More persons return themselves as younger than they are, than as older than they are."<sup>2</sup> Again, "Concentration is greater on years which are multiples of ten, than on years which are multiples of five and not of ten."<sup>3</sup>

To correct such recognized inaccuracies, statisticians are accustomed to modify census reports as to ages by various methods. The methods need not concern us here. The character of the

<sup>1</sup> "Del age de xl ans et plus," *Life Records*, p. 265.

<sup>2</sup> Allyn A. Young, "Comparative Accuracy of Different Forms of Quinquennial Age Groups," *Publications of the American Statistical Association*, VII, 27, p. 38. Professor Young also wrote the article called "Age" in the *Supplementary Analysis of the Twelfth Census*, p. 130.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27. This concentration of returns on certain years is well illustrated by a chart in *Vital Statistics* (A. Newsholme), p. 3.

discrepancies between the reported ages and the corrected tables are more to the point. Thus, to illustrate the statement above, that more people give their ages as too low than too high, note these figures.<sup>1</sup> In the United States census of 1890, 1,359,566 persons reported themselves as thirty years of age, while only 891,222 reported twenty-nine years, and only 729,771 reported the age thirty-one. The correct figures, according to Professor Young, should have been 984,000 for twenty-nine years, 969,057 for thirty years, 942,977 for thirty-one years. Thus 390,509 more persons reported the age of thirty than were of that age. That is, roughly, more than every fourth person reporting the age of thirty was inaccurate. The exact proportion is 1 to every 3.7 persons.

Moreover, as Professor Young also points out, those persons who were inaccurate in reporting the age of thirty were more probably in excess of thirty rather than below thirty years old. For while, according to his corrected tables, 92,778 fewer than should have done so reported the age of twenty-nine, 213,206 fewer than should have done so reported the age of thirty-one. That is, more than one-fifth of those who were thirty-one understated their age by at least one year, and thus helped to make up the unusually large report for the age of thirty. On the other hand, less than one-tenth of those reporting the age of twenty-nine were inaccurate, and probably few of them reported the age of thirty. Clearly more people in 1890 gave their ages as too low than too high. Besides, such facts are not peculiar to one census, or to one country. So far as census tables show, they represent a tendency common to all peoples and to all periods.

Again, to illustrate the statement above, that age returns in a census today show concentration on multiples of ten, note these figures from Professor Young's table. The actual reports for the years forty, fifty, sixty—to take the ages Mr. Moore uses—were 1,037,336, 776,333, 502,788, respectively. The corrected numbers are, in the same order, 682,948, 516,735, 321,397. Thus the reports in excess of the facts were 354,388 for forty years; 259,598 for fifty years; 181,391 for sixty years. For forty and fifty years the exact proportion of inaccuracy is 1 person in 2.9, for sixty years 1 person

<sup>1</sup> Allyn A. Young, "The Adjustment of Census Age Returns," *Western Reserve University Bulletin*, V, 79 f.; table on p. 101.

in 2.8. At least every third person who reported an even number forty, fifty, or sixty was reporting inaccurately.

The relation of these figures to the testimony as to age by witnesses in the Scrope and Grosvenor trial will be evident. In our own country, in 1890, at least every third person who gave the age of forty, fifty, or sixty years reported himself as somewhat younger than he was. Contrary to Mr. Moore's idea, therefore, it is no matter of surprise that five centuries before, almost to the year, something like the same thing should have taken place. Of the 75 persons out of about 140 between the ages of thirty-five and sixty-four who testified that they were forty, fifty, or sixty years of age, with or without the addition "and more," one-third may be at once assumed to have understated their ages. This leaves 50 out of 140 to be accounted for. If all these added the phrase "and more" to the year given, as Chaucer did, we may suppose they belonged in the groups of years forty to forty-four, fifty to fifty-four, sixty to sixty-four. That is, these are the years to which belong those who wrongly concentrate on forty, fifty, or sixty by understating their ages. Now these groups include, in all, fifteen years, or one-half the period Mr. Moore takes for his basis of comparison. It would be natural enough if 50 out of 140, or a little more than one-third, had been of ages falling in one-half of the time specified, the period between the ages of thirty-five and sixty-four. Indeed, if the whole 75, only slightly more than one-half the 140, should be included in the fifteen years cited above, it would be quite within reason. As I have not access at present to the volumes of Sir Harris Nicolas on the *Scrope and Grosvenor Controversy*, I do not know exactly how many witnesses added the phrase *et plus* to the year of age given.<sup>1</sup> Nor is this necessary. Even if only a part did, the general tendency in such cases to concentrate on multiples of ten, probably stronger five centuries ago than today, would fairly account for the facts. It is therefore wholly unnecessary to suppose, as Mr. Moore does, that the ages attributed to the witnesses were the guess of a recording clerk.

<sup>1</sup> Fortunately Chaucer was one of these. We must infer that he was not content with the general concentration on a multiple of ten, and this "and more" must therefore be reckoned with in his particular case. Even in the case of other witnesses Mr. Moore is scarcely justified in disregarding this "*et plus*" as practically meaningless. The phrase may have meant different things to different individuals, but at least has some significance.

Let there be no misunderstanding of this argument. It is not my purpose to prove the accuracy of the witnesses in the Scrope and Grosvenor trial, and hence reason for Chaucer's accuracy as well. To do that would be but to repeat, in another form, the fallacious reasoning of Sir Harris Nicolas. I have tried to show that the inaccuracies of the witnesses are not so remarkable as they have been supposed to be. That they are not so different from similar inaccuracies under circumstances not wholly dissimilar today. Yet our main interest is with the testimony of a single individual, the poet Chaucer, whose appearance in this trial makes one more definite fact of his life.

Can we, then, in the light of modern statistics, make a more exact interpretation of Chaucer's reference to his age as "forty years and more."<sup>1</sup> Let us begin with another conclusion of Professor Young regarding the census statistics of 1890. He says:

It would appear that the four years below forty (thirty-six to thirty-nine) are excessively large as compared with the years above forty (forty-one to forty-four). This is probably chargeable in part to a peculiar tendency on the part of those whose ages are greater than forty to return themselves as less than forty. It would seem also that the concentration on the year forty is drawn in but very slight degree from years less than forty.<sup>2</sup>

This means, as applied to the testimony in the Scrope and Grosvenor trial, that those who testified they were forty years of age were certainly as old as that, and perhaps a little more. That is, understatement, not overstatement, of age is the rule. If, then, Chaucer had acknowledged forty years only in 1386, we may reasonably infer he could not have been less than that age. Mr. Moore is quite incorrect, therefore, in assuming from the inaccuracies of other witnesses that Chaucer may have been "only thirty-six or thirty-eight years old."<sup>3</sup> Overstatement of age cannot be assumed as likely, and cannot be argued in a case for which we have no independent testimony. Besides, if there is a tendency in the present age to hesitate in acknowledging forty years, it was probably much stronger at a time when the age of forty was regarded as "old," or approaching old age.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> It is some years since I purposed to make the application of modern age statistics to this problem. Mr. Moore's article merely gives the occasion.

<sup>2</sup> Allyn A. Young, "Comparative Accuracy," etc., as above, pp. 36-37.

<sup>3</sup> P. 6 of *Anglia* article cited above.

<sup>4</sup> Compare Chaucer's own allusion to his old age in the *Envoy to Scogan*, probably written when he was at most fifty-three years old, and Skeat's comment, with other examples, in *Works of Chaucer*, I, xvi.

Can we go one step farther? What light do modern statistics throw upon the further acknowledgment of Chaucer in his "forty years and more"? The authority of Professor Young has already been quoted to show that the concentration in the census reports upon the year forty is drawn mainly from the years forty-one, forty-two, forty-three, forty-four. Thus, the 354,388 who wrongly reported their age as forty in the census of 1890 are assumed by Professor Young to belong to the years forty-one, forty-two, forty-three, forty-four in the sums 171,239, 5,225, 81,078, and 96,846, respectively. Arranged in the order of frequency given, the years of these inaccurate reports are forty-one, forty-four, forty-three, forty-two. We cannot know which if any of these numbers represent Chaucer's "forty years and more." We may consider the probabilities in relation to other facts of his life. The age of forty-one in 1386 is wholly improbable for Chaucer, since his birth year would then have been 1345, and he would have been only fourteen when arming for the campaign of 1359 and only fifteen when he bore letters from Calais to England, as discovered by M. Delachenal.<sup>1</sup> The age of forty-four, the next in general probability, is also to be preferred to forty-three or forty-two on all grounds. It is more reasonable to believe Chaucer was at least seventeen when arming for the campaign of 1359, than that he was fifteen or sixteen.

But may Chaucer have been older than forty-four in 1386? It has already been implied, in the first quotation from Professor Young, that modern census tables show a concentration on multiples of five as well as multiples of ten, though the concentration is much more frequent in the latter than in the former case. In the census of 1890, 354,388 in excess of the correct number concentrated upon forty years of age, while a little more than half as many in excess of the correct number, or 204,800, concentrated upon forty-five.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps little is to be inferred from these figures directly. Yet if Chaucer had been forty-four years or under in 1386 the probabilities are great that he would have been

<sup>1</sup> *Histoire de Charles V*, II, 241.

<sup>2</sup> In the same census the concentration on thirty was more than twice as great as on thirty-five, that on fifty more than three times as great as on fifty-five. The figures in excess of the corrected ones for thirty and thirty-five are 390,509 and 181,114; for fifty and fifty-five, 359,598 and 73,824.



satisfied with the acknowledgment of forty years of age. If in 1890, as has been shown above, every third man who was forty-one, forty-two, forty-three, or forty-four reported forty years, it would not be strange if Chaucer, five centuries ago, should have been willing to do the same. His testimony to "forty years and more" is not proof that he was more than forty-four years of age. It does lend color to the idea that he may have been forty-five or a little more, and yet have reported as he did. If he were forty-four in 1386 he would have been born in 1342. If his testimony to more than forty years means anything in the light of modern statistics, he may easily have been born in 1341 or even in 1340.<sup>1</sup>

For practical purposes it is not necessary to support the validity of Chaucer's testimony. To say that he was born about 1340 is ordinarily sufficient. Yet to see in the testimony to his age in 1386 a fairly valid statement of fact is pleasant, because the impression left by Chaucer's works and what we know of his life is that of a more than usually accurate man, even of an exact man for his time.<sup>2</sup> His employment on many and important missions of diplomacy lends color to this idea. In the article above mentioned, Mr. Moore has added valuable proof of the poet's business ability, as shown by his long tenure of the controllership of customs, compared with the terms of other incumbents.<sup>3</sup> Even his works give evidence of the accuracy of the man in more ways than one. He twice recorded, in a manner we can hardly suppose accidental, the particular day of the month when he had the vision of the *House of Fame*. The *Lines to Adam Scriven* indicate his insistence on exactness in recording his verses. His references to his sources, when understood as he intended, are usually correct, as my colleague Professor Hulme suggests. His exactness in referring to the appearance of the planet

<sup>1</sup> In the interest of extreme exactness it should be noted that Chaucer may have been only forty-five when testifying in the Scrope and Grosvenor trial of 1386 and yet have been born in 1340, as he reckoned it. This would have been true if the date of his birth had fallen between December 15, 1340, and March 25, 1341. Or, if he had been born in the latter half of December, he would have still been only forty-five in 1386 and have been born in 1340, as we reckon it. Either of these possibilities would make it easy to interpret his "forty years and more" as a fairly exact statement of his age.

<sup>2</sup> I do not forget Professor Lounsbury's criticism of Chaucer for certain minor inaccuracies in his works; see *Studies in Chaucer*, II, 177-88, 416-26. Yet the number mentioned is small compared with the many allusions in his work as a whole.

<sup>3</sup> See pp. 14-19, and especially p. 18.

Venus in the *Parliament of Birds* has been fruitful in dating the work. The similarly exact allusions to time in the *Canterbury Tales* are of unusual value for the same purpose. The whole of the *Astrolabe* gives proof of an exact mind, a mind inquisitive and acquisitive of what we should call science, today.

In one case, it is true, we might apparently accuse Chaucer of error in a fact about which he must have had some accurate knowledge. Curiously enough this concerns the age of a prominent man with whom the poet was more or less intimately associated. In the *Book of the Duchess* (l. 455) Chaucer gives the age of John of Gaunt as "four and twenty" instead of nine and twenty as it should have been. This has been explained, it is true, as a possible error of xxiiij for xxviii by the loss of v in copying.<sup>1</sup> Yet such explanation has always seemed to me less likely than that Chaucer was purposely flattering the young prince by an understatement of his age. In either case, however, we have good reason for not assuming a mere inaccuracy on Chaucer's part. Still, if Chaucer's understatement of John of Gaunt's age was for purposes of flattery, we have something akin to the understatement of ages by witnesses in the Scrope and Grosvenor trial. It may indicate a common tendency of the time. If, then, Chaucer's emphasis of forty was an understatement of his own age as much as he understated that of John of Gaunt in the *Book of the Duchess*, we should again reach the conclusion that he was about forty-five years old in 1386.

Yet it is better to arrive at this conclusion through such interpretation of Chaucer's testimony as I have made in the body of this paper. That interpretation assumes Chaucer's statement to have been intended as accurate, since we have no evidence to the contrary. It then explains his testimony as to his age in the light, not of statements by a few others of his own time who may or may not have given their own ages correctly, but of general tendencies among people of all nations today, tendencies likely to have been more, rather than less, pronounced five centuries ago.

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<sup>1</sup> Mr. Brock's suggestion, noted by Professor Skeat.